DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 249 510 CS 208 603

AUTHOR Eblen, Charlene
TITLE Peter Elbow's "Believing Game": A Focus for a Writing Conference.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (35th, New York City, NY, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Games; Group Discussion; Group Experience; Inservice Teacher Education; Listening; Positive Reinforcement; *Reading Aloud to Others; Secondary Education; *Sensitivity Training; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Elbow (Peter); *Teacher Student Conferences

ABSTRACT

One way to help the solitary student shape his or her ideas in writing is to arrange for the high school writing teacher to practice Peter Elbow's "believing game." This can be accomplished through a conference in which teachers bring drafts of some piece of writing they would like to work on. The heart of the conference begins as the teachers, working in small groups, introduce themselves and comment about some past writing experience. Each writer then takes a turn reading his or her writing aloud while the others in the small group listen. The goal is to share perceptions about the writing, not to decide that one response is better or more valid than another. Listeners tell the writer what went on in their heads as they listened, what associations they made with the writing, and what the writing reminded them of. At the next stage, each writer has three hours of solitude to contemplate his or her writing and to make revisions. Writers then have a choice of having their listeners respond again, using the same pattern of questions used earlier or asking for additional responses that relate to rhetorical considerations. Following this session, the conference ends with everyone coming together to share perceptions of the believing game and to explore some possible ways to use believing strategies in the classroom. It is expected that students whose teachers play the believing game with them during the exploratory stages of writing will, in the end, be more engaged with their writing and have a clearer understanding of the needs of the reader. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED249510

Peter Elbow's "Believing Game": A Focus for a Writing Conference

Charlene Eblen
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50614

Paper presented at the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
New York City
March, 1984

CS208603

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charlene Eblen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Peter Elbow's "Believing Game": A Focus for a Writing Conference

Imagine, if you will, an old-fashioned see-saw, a lone student with an essay in hand perched high in the air at one end, while several teachers with red pens in hand weigh down the other end with their critical doubts. Such a position leaves the student solitary and stranded as she seeks to shape her ideas in writing. The major goal of our new conference (christened the "Bring a Draft" Conference) is to redress the balance, to bring interested readers to the student's end of the see-saw to give her support by helping her explore what she wants to say.

The first step in helping the solitary student is to arrange for her high school writing teacher to practice Peter Elbow's "believing game" with the writing of several colleagues and, in turn, to experience these same colleagues believing in a draft of her writing. This practice will show--not simply tell--the teacher how the game is played and how it may aid a writer, especially in the early stages of developing written discourse.

To practice the believing game, we are inviting thirty high school teachers to join ten of our English faculty for our new Bring a Draft Conference this fall. The teachers will be ones that have actively worked with our Student as Critic Contest by having their students enter often, or by entering the teachers' division themselves, or by serving on our state board. We will require that the teachers attend the conference in pairs, that is two from fifteen different locales. (The letter of invitation is the first item in your handout.) In this way, when the teachers return to their schools after the conference, they will not be isolated but will have another person to talk with. Because freeing teachers from a dozen or so districts on the same school day is difficult, we decided to schedule

the conference for a Saturday. We chose the third Saturday in September, a time when the school year is well-launched but the pressures of a grading period are still absent. Also Iowa usually enjoys superb weather in late September. For the conference site, we chose a Retreat House in a beautiful rural setting a few miles outside of our university town.

Now for the shape of the conference day. It moves rhythmically from large group to small support group to solitude, then back to small support group, and ends with everyone together. (The conference schedule is the next item in your handout.)

Each of our forty teachers brings a draft of some piece of writing s/he would like to work on. Any topic or mode is welcome. The only restriction (because of time constraints) is length; we ask that the draft be no more than four or five pages. Of course, it may be shorter, or it may be the beginning of a much longer piece.

After we greet one another over coffee, all of us gather for a thirty minute session; this includes a quick overview of the conference day and a brief rationale for experimenting with the believing game. (Professor Lounsberry has just covered the major points of our rationale.) Everyone receives guidelines to use for playing the believing game and is then assigned to one of the ten small groups, each with four members. We plan to split the teacher pairs from the same district, assigning each to a different small group. While we ask them to attend in pairs as a hedge against isolation when they return to their schools, we also wish to avoid any "monitoring" of each other's work during the conference.

The heart of the conference begins during the next stage as the small groups practice Peter Elbow's believing game. In the groups, introductions are first in order along with a brief comment from each writer

about some past writing experience. We will eschew fat generalizations (i.e., I hate revising or I always procastinate) for specific happenings. (An example: "Last month I was writing in my journal about the delight of finding a perfect apple murex shell on the beach, and as I described the spirals of the shell, each showing a new stage of growth, I found myself like Oliver Wendell Holmes comparing the spirals of the shell to the cycles in my life. I was surprised, and since an apple murex looks nothing like his chambered nautilus, I want to play around with the image." Not all comments need be happy. Another example: "I still remember the shock of my first freshman comp paper returned with a big C--this after straight A's on everything I wrote in high school English classes.") The goal is that the comments be specific.

After the introductions, each writer takes a turn reading her writing aloud while the others in the small group listen. Listeners are asked to follow the rules for the believing game in their guidelines. (Please see your handout.) We ask them to believe the writing, to look through the lens the writer is looking through. Elbow's phrase is "see-as"--to SEE AS the writer sees. Or to use an Indian phrase, we ask listeners to walk a mile in the writer's mocassins. Our goal is to share perceptions about the writing, not to decide that one response is "better" or more "valid" than another. To help us flex our believing muscles and ward off critical doubt, we will also follow guidelines that provide for what Peter Elbow calls reader-based responses to the writing. (A word here about the role of our university faculty in the small groups: Like the high school teachers, we will be writers with work-in-progress to read in the group. We will not be experts making pronouncements from on high, but listeners making responses to the writing of others, and writers

attending to the responses given to our writing. We will act as guides in the sense that we will model responses appropriate to the rules for the believing game. We will also be ready to gently nudge our group back to the rules of the game if members begin to stray from them. All of us were in a workshop with Peter Elbow at last year's Student as Critic Conference, and we have scheduled a half-day "refresher course" before the Bring a Draft Conference to discuss and practice the believing game.) We are using four categories for our responses in the small groups. First, we tell the writer about our experience during the reading. Elbow's phrase for this is "movies of the mind." We tell the writer what went on in our heads as we listened, what associations we made with the writing, and what the writing reminded us of. Next, we respond more directly to the writing itself, telling the writer what words or phrases were memorable or surprising for us, what idea(s) were most interesting, and how we would sum up the piece in a phrase or possibly a word. In our third category, we try to look through or beyond the writing and tell the writer what ideas we see lying in the wings waiting for an entrance or what direction we see the writing going. If there is time, we will also respond using metaphor and analogy. Examples are on the handout.

After each writer has read and heard responses from the support group, the next stage of the conference day begins. Each writer now has three hours of solitude to contemplate her writing, to reflect on the perceptions and responses of her group, and to make revisions. In the rural setting of the Retreat House, writers are free to wander about the spacious grounds, sprawl in a soft chair by a picture window with a view over the Iowa countryside, or sit on a straight chair at a desk in a small private room, "a room of their own." What the writer chooses to do with

the writing is, or course, the writer's decision. Listeners' responses are simply that, neither true nor false, good nor bad, but one person's response to the words of another. Each writer decides how and how much to revise. This time for solitary contemplation and revision will be punctuated with lunch, food for the body to supplement the morning's food for thought. Writers have the option of gathering with others in a dining room if they wish to season their time for solitude with a dash of sociability, or of having lunch alone in their private room if they prefer, so as not to interrupt the writing process.

After the period for contemplation, re-seeing, and rewriting, the small support groups meet again and repeat the procedure of the morning with each writer reading aloud again. In this second support group session, writers have a choice of having their listeners again respond using the same pattern of questions used earlier or of asking for additional responses that relate to rhetorical considerations. The writer is in charge; she decides what kind of response she wants to her writing. Writers may choose to ask listeners to consider such rhetorically related questions as

What tone do you hear?

What attitude do you sense towards my material, toward my reader?

What do you see holding the piece together?

Would you like more information at any point?

Is anything not clear to you?

If you were revising this, what is one change you would make?

This last group of questions begins to move away from the believing game toward the doubting game. While we do not want to say that doubting is outlawed for the day if a writer truly wants to entertain some doubts, we do want the emphasis to remain on the believing game largely because,

in our experience, most teachers are expert doubters but spend little time flexing their believing muscles.

Following the second small group session, the conference will end, as it began, with everyone together to share perceptions of the believing game and to explore some possible ways to use believing strategies in the classroom. It is, of course, our hope that the teachers who attend the "Bring a Draft" Conference will carry the believing game back into their classrooms. Given this, the student perched alone on one end of the see-saw will have support in the early stages of her writing. We expect that students whose teachers play the believing game with them during the exploratory stages of writing will, in the end, be more engaged with their writing and have a clearer understanding of the needs of a reader. This can only mean higher quality entries in our Student as Critic Contest.

In addition to helping student writers, another goal of the conference is that teachers see the usefulness of the believing game in their own writing. We hope they will practice it when they work alone on their own writing and also begin to support one another's writing in the exploratory stages. As we look ahead 2 or 3 years, we see these teachers becoming the nucleus for communities of writers, communities that embrace not only English teachers and their students, but also teachers in other disciplines, parents, and people in the community not directly tied to the schools. Our country has a long tradition of the town meeting in which people speak out. We would like to see citizens share their ideas through the written word as well as the spoken. Iowa, a state of many small communities with a tradition of banding together whether to hold a precinct caucus, celebrate a centennial, or help in time of disaster, is a fertile ground for

community writing. The "Bring a Draft" Conference plants a seed that may, with careful cultivation, grow into communities of writers across the state.

University of Northern Iowa
Department of English Language and Literature

Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614
Telephone (319) 273-2821

April 13, 1984

Dear Colleague:

The University of Northern Iowa Department of English Language and Literature is inaugurating a new conference this fall to complement its spring Iowa Student as Critic Conference.

Though we have tried from the inception of the Student as Critic Conference to put the greatest emphasis on the growth and encouragement of each writer, and to downplay competition and winning, the Conference, by its very nature, rewards excellence and focuses on the final written "product." We consciously designed this Conference this way because of UNI's commitment to setting high standards of excellence in thinking and writing and to fostering greater communication among thinkers and writers in the state--at all educational levels.

With the Iowa Student as Critic Conference now well-established, we are ready to initiate a new fall conference with a different focus from that of the spring conference, a focus on the writing process (rather than the final product). This one-day "Bring a Draft Conference" (as we have christened it) will celebrate responding to writing-in-progress in affirmative, exploratory, non-threatening ways by using the techniques of Peter Elbow's "believing game." In both the history of mankind and the development of each individual, belief precedes critical doubt; it is natural then for a period of supportive belief in the writer's material to precede analytical criticism. The new fall Conference is thus a logical precursor for the spring one.

For this fall Conference we want interested Iowa teachers to literally "bring a draft" of a piece of writing that they would like to work on during one day spent at the beautiful, quiet American Martyrs' Retreat House just west of Cedar Falls. For this Conference, in contrast to the Student as Critic Conference, we want writing-in-the-making, not a highly polished, finished product.

The enclosed Conference schedule gives full details for the Bring a Draft Conference. After an opening overview of Elbow's believing game, we will work in writing support groups of four, reading our writing-in-progress and receiving responses that follow the rules of the believing game. Each writer will then have time alone (in a room of one's own or out in the glorious fall countryside--or both) to contemplate her or his writing and to revise. The small groups will reconvene in the afternoon to again read their writing and share responses. The Conference will close with a session to share what we have learned about the believing game and to explore possible applications for our classrooms.

We hope to expand the Bring a Draft Conference eventually to include a group of writers from a specific locale (teachers in many disciplines, students, administrators, and general citizens). Such groups could then return home as a community of writers who might continue to meet and share their writing with each other. Eventually (with our financial help) they might even edit and publish selected pieces of their work.

For September 1984, however, we wish to initiate this process by inviting English teachers. Each participant is to bring some writing-in-progress, a working draft. Because of time limitations, we ask that your draft be no more than four or five pages. It may, of course, be shorter, or it may be the opening for a longer work. We also ask you to come in pairs from a given locale. Thus if you would like to work on your writing at the Bring a Draft Conference, find a colleague in English to attend with you. You will then be able to compare notes and discuss the experience with someone after the Conference is over. You may even wish to begin setting up a "community of writers" in your school or town.

Please let us know by July 1 if you would like to join us for the first Bring a Draft Conference. The registration fee of $15 includes coffee and rolls to start your day and lunch. If you would like to arrive on Friday, we can reserve a private room for you (cost: $12) at the Retreat House. We are limiting this first Conference to only 30 participants--15 pairs from 15 locales throughout Iowa--so we will accept registrations on a first-come, first-served basis.

We are looking forward to a stimulating day, a time to hear what is on the minds of colleagues, and a time to devote to writing. We hope you share our excitement about the creative possibilities for the Conference and will want to join us.

Sincerely yours,

Mac Eblen

Charlene (Mac) Eblen
Conference Coordinator

CE/d

BRING A DRAFT CONFERENCE

Schedule

American Martyrs' Retreat House
September 22, 1984

8:30 - 9:00	Registration (coffee and rolls)
9:00 - 9:25	Overview of Peter Elbow's "believing game" Introduction to guidelines for playing the game Small group assignments
9:30 - 11:00	Small writing support groups Practicing the believing game
11:00 - 12:15	Time alone for contemplation and writing
12:15 - 1:00	Lunch (either alone or in the dining room)
1:00 - 2:00	Time alone for writing
2:00 - 3:30	Small writing support groups reconvene Playing the believing game again Consideration of doubts if writers wish to do so
3:40 - 4:30	Full group closing session The effects of the believing game on writers, on readers Implications for our classrooms

During the 11:00-2:00 period for writers to work alone, you will have access to a small private room for your work. Or you may stay in the central part of the building or wander through the grounds as you prefer.

Coffee and tea will be available throughout the day.

The Bring a Draft Conference
Guidelines for the small writing support groups

In this conference, we will focus on the writing process (rather than the finished product) by engaging in Peter Elbow's "believing game." In our small groups, we will take turns reading our work-in-progress aloud. Our listeners will then respond by following the guide lines below.

Our goal is to share perceptions about the writing, not to decide that one response is "better" or more "valid" than another. As we listen, we will try to actively believe what the writer is saying, to look through the lens the writer is looking through. Peter Elbow's phrase for this is "see-as"--to SEE AS the writer sees. We will also try to actively believe what every listener sees in the writing, to see through the lens of each listener as well as the lens of the writer.

General Rules for the believing game. (From pp. 169-170 in WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS.)

1. Never argue.
2. Believe everything, particularly what seems strange or unpleasant.
3. Try to put yourself into the skin of people with other perceptions.
4. Make metaphorical transformations of assertions to help you enter into them.

Response categories for listeners to use: (Derived from chap. 23, pp. 255-263 in WRITING WITH POWER.)

1. "Movies of the mind."
   What happened to you as you listened to the writing? How did you experience it? What associations did you make with the writing--beliefs, experiences, ideas, feelings? What sense of the writer do you have?
2. Your perceptions of the writing.
   What does the writing say? How would you summarize it in a sentence or two, then in a phrase or a word? What words or phrases stand out? What interested you most--perhaps an image, an idea, a metaphor?
3. A look through or past the writing.
   What ideas do you see "lying in the wings" waiting to make an entrance? What is the writing reaching towards? Where is the writing headed? What directions might it take?
4. Image, metaphor, analogy.
   Create an image for the stance the writer takes with the reader (possible examples: Big Daddy at the head of the table; a coach shaking a fist). How is the writer delivering the writing--on a silver platter, as a blow to the head, as a surprise package in the mailbox? If the writing were medicine, what would it cure? How would it be given?

Questions related to rhetorical considerations that writers may choose to ask their listeners to use during the second small group session. (Derived from chap. 22, pp. 252-254 in WRITING WITH POWER.)

What holds the piece together? Is anything not clear? Where would you like more information? What tone do you hear? What attitude do you sense that the writer has toward the material, toward the reader? If you were revising this, what is one change that you would make?